PITTA

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Trip Report: Nagarhole National Park / Kabini Backwaters, Oct & Nov 2021

Text & Photos: Aditya Rao

Crested Serpent Eagle

With the waning pandemic and the approaching Dussehra vacation, we decided to go on a tour to Nagarhole National Park or Kabini Forest – the names are used interchangeably. The trip was organized through Kabini Lodges run by Jungle Lodges and Resorts, surprisingly a quite professionally run government organization. The access to the forest is always through the jungle safari, organized as a part of the package which comes with your resort stay (no private tours are allowed). I had the privilege of going on 6 safaris. The resort and the forest are set against the Kabini backwaters. This was created when a dam was built against the river Kapila in order to irrigate Mysore and the adjoining areas in the 1970s. It took up forest space, but increased the wildlife due to available water source even during summers.

One thing that struck me when compared to other national forests is that the conservation effort is taken seriously at Nagarhole; the Forest Department is well organized, and the forest is being preserved well. Though there are jungle safaris, less than 10% of the forest area is earmarked for access to these vehicles. The visitors get access to resident fauna who have made these areas their home. From what I gleaned, only about 5-7 tigers (out of 120+) and a handful of leopards call this zone their home. Nagarhole is a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere and home to more than 300+ species of birds, a few being endemic. In addition one can also spot several big cats and large mammals.

Blue-throated Flycatcher

Rufous-bellied Eagle juvenile

Honestly, it is very hard to bird from a safari jeep; nevertheless, I kept my binoculars and telephoto lens ready for any opportunities, and I was not disappointed at all. The forests were teeming with raptors, woodpeckers and Malabar endemics; some were lifers too.

Grey Junglefowl

Brahminy Kite

Indian Leopard

Bengal Tiger (F)

Of course, a visit to Kabini Forest is never really complete without some big cat sightings. I was very fortunate to sight about 4 tigers, 2 leopards, and many gaur, elephants, sambar deer, spotted deer and grey langurs.

Gaur (Indian Bison)

Indian Elephant

Sambar Deer & Jungle Myna

I was glad to be able to capture some of the fauna in their natural surroundings.

Dhole (Indian Wild Dog)

Indian Peafowl

I also saw several birds which I could not clearly identify or photograph. The list of birds seen at Nagarhole and Kabini is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	13	Great Egret	*Ardea alba*
2	Grey Junglefowl	*Gallus sonneratii*	14	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*
3	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*	15	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*
4	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	16	Crested Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis cheela*
5	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*	17	Rufous-bellied Eagle	*Lophotriorchis kienerii*
6	Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*	18	Greater Spotted Eagle	*Aquila clanga*
7	Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*	19	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*
8	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	20	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*
9	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	21	Brahminy Kite	*Haliastur indus*
10	Green Sandpiper	*Tringa ochropus*	22	Brown Fish Owl	*Ketupa zeylonensis*
11	Woolly-necked Stork	*Ciconia episcopus*	23	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*
12	Little Cormorant	*Microcarbo niger*	24	White-cheeked Barbet	*Megalaima viridis*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
25	Greater Flameback	*Chrysocolaptes lucidus*	40	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*
26	Common Flameback	*Dinopium javanense*	41	Cinereous Tit	*Parus cinereus*
27	Black-rumped Flameback	*Dinopium benghalense*	42	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*
28	Streak-throated Woodpecker	*Picus xanthopygaeus*	43	Red-whiskered Bulbul	*Pycnonotus jocosus*
29	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*	44	Jungle Babbler	*Turdoides striata*
30	Plum-headed Parakeet	*Psi1acula cyanocephala*	45	Southern Hill Myna	*Gracula indica*
31	Malabar Parakeet	*Psittacula columboides*	46	Brahminy Starling	*Sturnia pagodarum*
32	Small Minivet	*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*	47	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
33	Black-naped Oriole	*Oriolus chinensis*	48	Jungle Myna	*Acridotheres fuscus*
34	Black-hooded Oriole	*Oriolus xanthornus*	49	Asian Brown Flycatcher	*Muscicapa dauurica*
35	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*	50	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*
36	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	*Dicrurus poradiscus*	51	Pied Bushchat	*Saxicola caprata*
37	Indian Paradise-flycatcher	*Terpsiphone paradisi*	52	Grey Wagtail	*Motacilla cinerea*
38	Brown Shrike	*Lanius cristatus*	53	White-browed Wagtail	*Motacilla maderaspatensis*
39	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*			

Coppersmith Barbet

Kabini Lodge where I stayed provided an excellent opportunity for me to bird in the resort gardens, and I saw many Coppersmith & White-cheeked Barbets, Chestnut-tailed & Blyth's Starlings, White-naped & Greater Flameback Woodpeckers, etc.

Chestnut-tailed Starling

Some other photos taken during the trips:

Common Flameback

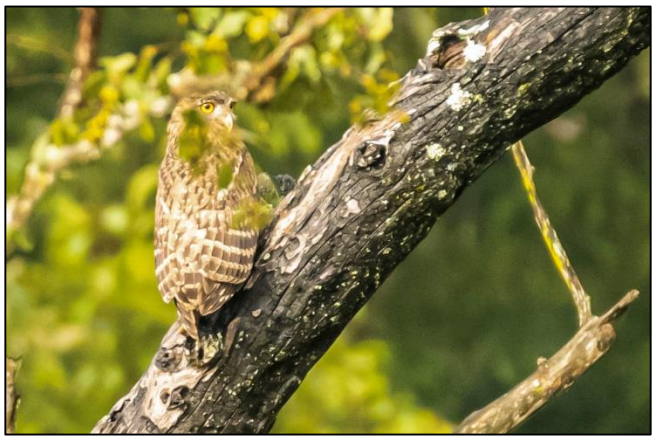
Greater Spotted Eagle

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo

Shikra

Plum-headed Parakeet female

White-throated Kingfisher



Brown Fish Owl

Grey Wagtail

Bengal Tiger (F) on the alert

Wild Boar

Brown Shrike

Grey Heron

Indian Spot-billed Duck

Oriental Magpie Robin male

Indian Spotted Deer

Grey (or Hanuman) Langur

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Trip Report: Kanakapura, Bengaluru, Oct 9, 2021

Text & Photos: Rama Sarvani

The habitat around the Mavathur Kere

I had been wanting to see the European Bee-eaters for quite some time. So, artist and fellow birder Hemant and I decided to search for European Bee-eaters which are known to visit certain areas around Bangalore during the winters.

Bee-eaters are a group of non-passerine birds in the family Meropidae encompassing three genera and twenty-seven species. There are five species of bee-eaters found in the Deccan region, Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*), Blue-tailed Bee-eater (*Merops philippinus*), Chestnut-headed Bee-eater (*Merops leschenaulti*), European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*), and Blue-bearded Bee-eater (*Nyctyornis athertoni*).

Of these, European Bee-eaters are known to migrate to India. Few e-bird records show that they have been spotted in Jammu and Kashmir also; there has been evidence that those are a breeding population, although not much study has been done yet. They have brown and yellow upperparts with green wings and black beak, and the sexes are alike, though females tend to have greener, rather than gold feathers on the shoulders. They can be easily mistaken for the Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, which is a resident species, barring a few morphological characteristics. Some records show they even have similar calls as a flock although some calls seemed different to me.

This is the only long-distance migrating bee-eater species that breeds in Europe and migrates to Africa and South Asia in winters. Almost the entire global population migrates to Africa but some choose to spend their winters in the Deccan.

Satellite view of the area around the lake

European Bee-eater

There have been many sightings over the years and this year, I was lucky to see them at Kanakapura which is about 60km south of Bangalore city. The area has a lake surrounded by a lot of reeds which are home to dragonflies and damselflies, which the bee-eaters feed on. There is a hill on one end of the lake where we spotted our first European Bee-eater perched on a wire along with a couple of Ashy Woodswallows (*Artamus fuscus*).

As we went further up the hill, we heard the calls of a flock circling above us in a swallow-like flight. We went atop the hill where we saw about 50 of them perched on a couple of wires which ran into the valley below.

European Bee-eater flock

Other birds in the locality

After spending some time observing the visitors, we walked around the hill to get an idea of the habitat. We got to witness some interesting species and behaviour.

Purple Sunbird female

We heard some calls coming from a *neem* tree on which a female Purple Sunbird (*Cinnyris asiaticus*) was dancing in response to the calls of a male, while a group of White-browed Bulbuls (*Pycnonotus luteolus*) called frantically and continuously.

White-browed Bulbul

References:

1. On Migration: https://birdsoftheworld.org/bow/species/eubeat1/cur/introduction

The full list of birds seen during the trip is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	European Bee-eater	*Merops apiaster*	11	Red-whiskered Bulbul	*Pycnonotus jocosus*
2	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*	12	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*
3	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	13	Grey Francolin	*Ortygornis pondicerianus*
4	Ashy Woodswallow	*Artamus fuscus*	14	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*
5	Little Grebe	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*	15	Brahminy Kite	*Haliastur indus*
6	Eurasian Coot	*Fulica atra*	16	Small Minivet	*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*
7	Little Cormorant	*Microcarbo niger*	17	White-browed Bulbul	*Pycnonotus luteolus*
8	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*	18	Purple-rumped Sunbird	*Leptocoma zeylonica*
9	Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*	19	Baya Weaver	*Ploceus philippinus*
10	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*	20	Paddyfield Pipit	*Anthus rufulus*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
21	Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	47	Jungle Myna	*Acridotheres fuscus*
22	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	48	Pied Bushchat	*Saxicola caprata*
23	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	49	Pale-billed Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
24	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*	50	White-browed Wagtail	*Motacilla maderaspatensis*
25	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*	51	Jungle Bush Quail	*Perdicula asiatica*
26	Plain Prinia	*Prinia inornata*	52	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*
27	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*	53	Greater Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*
28	Indian Spot-billed Duck	*Anas poecilorhyncha*	54	Jacobin (or Pied) Cuckoo	*Clamator jacobinus*
29	Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*	55	Oriental Darter	*Anhinga melanogaster*
30	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*	56	Purple Heron	*Ardea purpurea*
31	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*	57	Intermediate Egret	*Ardea intermedia*
32	Red-rumped Swallow	*Cecropis daurica*	58	Glossy Ibis	*Plegadis falcinellus*
33	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*	59	Black-headed Ibis	*Threskiornis melanocephalus*
34	Yellow-billed Babbler	*Argya affinis*	60	Black-winged Kite	*Elanus caeruleus*
35	Indian Robin	*Copsychus fulicatus*	61	Oriental Honey-buzzard	*Pernis ptilorhynchus*
36	Tricolored Munia	*Lonchura malacca*	62	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*
37	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	63	White-cheeked Barbet	*Psilopogon viridis*
38	White-breasted Waterhen	*Amaurornis phoenicurus*	64	Black-rumped Flameback	*Dinopium benghalense*
39	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*	65	Ashy Drongo	*Dicrurus leucophaeus*
40	Tawny-bellied Babbler	*Dumetia hyperythra*	66	Indian Paradise-flycatcher	*Terpsiphone paradisi*
41	Lesser Whistling-duck	*Dendrocygna javanica*	67	Long-tailed Shrike	*Lanius schach*
42	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	68	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
43	Grey-bellied Cuckoo	*Cacomantis passerinus*	69	Jungle Prinia	*Prinia sylvatica*
44	Asian Palm Swift	*Cypsiurus balasiensis*	70	Zitting Cisticola	*Cisticola juncidis*
45	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	71	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*
46	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*	72	Red Avadavat	*Amandava amandava*

Some other photos taken during the trip:

European Bee-eater

Little Grebe & Common (or Eurasian) Coot

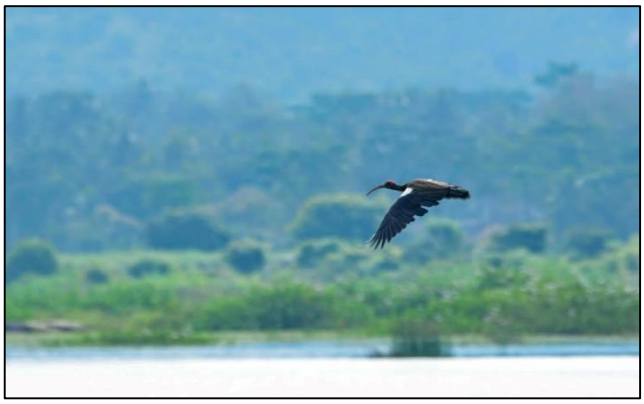
Baya Weaver

Ashy Woodswallow

Spotted Owlet

White-browed Bulbul

Common Kingfisher



Red-naped Ibis

Paddyfield Pipit

Green Bee-eater

Little Cormorant

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Lesser Crested Tern (*Thalasseus bengalensis*)

Lesser Crested Tern (L); Lesser Crested Tern showing bill colour difference and marked size contrast with Greater Crested Tern (R and behind) (Pazhaverkadu, Pulicat, March 03, 2020)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Laridae
Genus: *Thalasseus*
Species: *T. bengalensis*
Size: 35-37 cm

Description & distribution: The Lesser Crested Tern is a medium-sized tern from the family, Laridae. It is closely related to the Sandwich, Elegant and Chinese Crested Terns. Like most terns, the Lesser Crested Tern also has a sleek build and long pointed wings that help in fast flight. During summer – its breeding season – the Lesser Crested Tern has white underparts and grey upperwings, rump and central tail feathers; the flight feathers also darken during summer. The legs and head are black, and the long, fine bill is orange – one of the features (besides the marked size difference) that differentiates it from the other similar terns, like the Greater Crested Tern, with whom it is usually seen in mixed flocks. Its bill aids in differentiating it from the Sandwich Tern, the other similar tern with whom it shares some range overlaps – the bill of the Sandwich Tern is black with an orange tip. It has a glossy black crest that is shaggy at the rear, but shorter than the Greater Crested Tern. In winter, the flight feathers become lighter, and the black forehead, crown and forehead seen during summer become white, leaving only a black nape band. The sexes are similar, but juvenile birds show dark centres to wing coverts and secondaries, as well as the feathers of the mantle, scapulars and tertials, giving the upperparts a spotted appearance.

The Lesser Crested Tern breeds in subtropical coastal areas from the Mediterranean and the Red Sea across the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific, as well as Australia; some populations winter in South Africa while some stay back at the same location all year around. Three sub-species are recognized: *T. b. emigrata*, which breeds in the Mediterranean and winters in west Africa; *T. b. bengalensis*, seen in and around the Indian Ocean, including India; and *T. b. torresii*, seen from Indonesia down to Australia. These differ mainly in the colour of upperparts, and sometimes show marginal differences in size.

Habitat & behaviour: The Lesser Crested Tern is a marine tern, and frequents coasts, tidal creeks and open sea. It roosts in medium to large-sized groups, usually on open shores or larger creeks, in mixed flocks, usually along with Greater Crested, Common and Caspian Terns.

Like the Greater Crested Tern, its diet consists primarily of fish, though it may also pick up cephalopods, crustaceans and insects. It catches the fish primarily by direct plunge diving, usually in saline environments, and swallows the fish in mid-air. Its call is a loud, grating, upward-inflected *kree-it*, quite like the Sandwich Tern.

Nesting: The Lesser Crested Tern breeds in dense colonies on coasts and islands, and is known to indulge in courtship feeding. The typical nest is usually a shallow scrape on open ground. The usual clutch consists of 1-2 (and rarely 3) eggs, generally white or off-white in colour with black or dark brown spots. The sub-species *T. b. emigrata* is known to delay its breeding to late summer, so as to avoid the predatory Yellow-legged Gulls, which generally finish their breeding depart from the nesting areas by that time.

Local name: The Lesser Crested Tern is known as *'Kondai aala'* in Tamil, *'Nani dariyayi dhomdi'* in Gujarati, '*Chhotojhunt panpayra'* in Bengali and *'Cheriya kadalala'* in Malayalam.

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